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## Bingo game pays big dividends for pets and those who love them

By BILL BURKE , The Virginian-Pilot

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**Janis Dryer, president of the Animal Assistance League in Chesapeake, top, and volunteer Sandy Walsh count up the proceeds following the charity's weekly Monday night game in Virginia Beach.** stephen m. katz/the virginian-pilot

CHESAPEAKE — "Wipe your paws," commands the welcome mat at Janis Dryer's hotel.

### Corruption? Abuse? Bingo!



A SPECIAL REPORT

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Decorative fans whir and wicker furniture awaits visitors in the atrium of the Las Gaviotas Pet Hotel, where canine guests stay in "suites," romp on a playground and are towel-dried by staff members after a dip in a wading pool. The building also houses the Animal Assistance League of Virginia Inc., a shelter for abandoned animals.

All creatures, from stray tabbies to pampered suburban Shar-Peis, are welcome at the multi purpose animal emporium that Dryer, a brassy 60-year-old with strawberry-blond hair, runs.

The building and the property on which it sits – four prime, verdant acres in Great Bridge – are valued at about \$1 million, based on recent assessments, Dryer said.

"Bingo built this," Dryer said as she conducted a recent tour of the facility. She wore a lime-green T-shirt that read, "I work my tail off for the animals."

While the state cracks down on bingo scofflaws and outlaws, Dryer's experience demonstrates what can happen when the charity games are run

- **Chart:** [Hampton Roads, Virginia's bingo mecca](#)

- **Graphic:** [Receipts, expenses of a legal bingo game](#)

honestly and with attention to detail.

If there is a high priestess of bingo in Hampton Roads, it's Dryer, who has been overseeing the fund-raising games for 21 years.

Every Monday night, Dryer rules with authority over sessions at a hall on Cleveland Street in Virginia Beach. The games are played to benefit the non profit animal shelter. Last year, it was the 15th-largest game in Virginia, grossing \$1.87 million and producing \$264,270 in charitable proceeds, according to state records.

Dryer's success hasn't come easily.

She's been a bingo crook's worst nightmare. She testified before a grand jury investigating bingo graft in the 1980s. She once used hidden cameras to catch sticky-fingered employees pocketing proceeds. A suspected embezzler made off with \$25,000 when documents mysteriously burned in a shed. More recently, she nabbed a man trying to cash in fraudulent "instant" bingo cards after her workers noticed that his cards' serial numbers were wrong.

He was fined \$700 and got 20 days' suspended sentence.

On a recent evening at Cleveland Street hall – a night where nearly \$40,000, most of it cash, changed hands in a four-hour bingo frenzy– she offered her philosophy of keeping the games clean: "You gotta run a tight ship."

In the early days, she had problems finding a lender willing to finance the animal facility. Two mortgage companies and six banks turned her down when she told them how she planned to repay the loan, she said.

"Bankers don't like bingo," she said.

Now she's got the upper hand. On two occasions in recent years, developers seeking to get the land around her property rezoned from commercial to residential have capitulated to her demands. She was able to double her original acreage and build on to the facility. Now the shelter and pet hotel is a commercial oasis in a sea of two-story homes.

Asked about the price of success, she spoke of two divorces and a bout with problem drinking. Her only vice now, she says, is puffing Marlboro Lights.

"Would I do it all again? I'm not sure I would," she said. "There have been a lot of headaches."

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